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Look at the Clouds: Migration and West Sumatran 'Popular' Theatre

The numerous interrelated 'popular' theatres of Indonesia provide important evidence for the study of artistic interaction and change. The West Sumatran Randai theatre emerged in a culturally hybrid space and has been a sensitive index to local, national, and international flows and conditions. Matthew Isaac Cohen traces the origins of Randai in the late-colonial period and discusses its associations with *rantau* – a time of temporary migration, traditionally associated with the rite of passage to adulthood, but increasingly a semi-permanent exile for many Sumatrans. He then traces how and why Randai has now become more than a local art form, having been exported out of the province of West Sumatra to be utilized as source material for modern theatre by Indonesian theatre makers in Jakarta and Australia. Matthew Isaac Cohen is a Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow, a scholar of Indonesian theatre and performance, and a practising shadow puppeteer.

*Look at the clouds passing overhead,
We can find a sasaran [outdoor performance/
rehearsal space] anywhere,
At the Department of Information, or other
places.¹*

RANDAI, the signature theatre form of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra (Indonesia), has received significant attention from both Indonesian and foreign researchers in recent years.² This research has focused upon its contemporary performance characteristics (particularly choreography, martial arts, and music); cultural and social contexts; and recent changes in patterns of sponsorship and performance. However, although there has been some speculation about its origin, little substantial research has been done on the history of Randai over the last seventy years. What follows is a preliminary overview of this history. It raises more questions than are answered – only some of which perhaps *can* be answered from available archival and oral historical evidence.

Randai presents a particularly interesting case for scholars of Asian theatre, cultural studies, and folklore. Its origins are complex, involving a range of artistic borrowing, but it is basically a portmanteau of local cultural traditions of dance, music, martial arts, and

storytelling merged with a pan-Malay popular theatrical tradition.³ Initially presented by popular, commercially oriented troupes on elevated stages employing drop-and-wing scenery, it was localized⁴ within a few years and adapted to rural contingencies, becoming an arena theatre performed by amateur actors and musicians at ground level without scenery and with only minimal props.

In recent years, Randai has returned to proscenium stages, and reasonably high performance fees and government sponsorship have facilitated degrees of emergent professionalism and commercialism. Randai has thus gone down and up cultural escalators⁵ in the space of three generations. The transformation between low and high art, folk and urbane culture, conceived as a back and forth movement rather than a one-way stream, has been a central polemic in folklore studies for decades.⁶ Yet the disciplinary demands of theatre studies still pressure scholars to pigeonhole forms as 'folk', 'classical', 'modern', and so on, for want of a more adequate vocabulary.⁷ This essay argues against such reductive accounts, and for more nuanced, historically informed, dynamic accounts of theatrical processes.

The Minangkabau, the largest ethnic group of West Sumatra, are well known in anthro-

polological literature for their matrilineal social organization. The Minangkabau have practised Islam for centuries and speak an Austronesian language known as Minang (most today also being fluent in the national language, Indonesian). Traditionally, villages in the Minang homeland were organized into confederations known as *nagari*. Everyday life was governed by Islamic law as well as the norms of *adat*, semi-codified traditional precepts and laws often learned in the form of traditional sayings and tales. Randai, significantly, has been described as both an expression and reinforcement of *adat*.⁸ Extended families lived together in long houses (*rumah gadang*). Young men left their natal houses at adolescence and subsequently slept in *surau* (prayer houses) with their age-mates, studying religion and speech making, as well as practising martial arts in the *sasaran* (outdoor open space) adjacent to the *surau*. This separation was a preparation for *rantau*, a period of temporary migration.

In the past, going on the *rantau* involved young men travelling to the hinterlands of the *nagari* to gain experience in the outside world and to establish their fortune before returning to the Minang heartland to marry. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the need for migrant labour in Malaysia and other parts of the Indonesian archipelago, as well as opportunities for higher education, resulted in substantial numbers of men (and women) leaving for more distant destinations. Some of these Minang migrants come back to West Sumatra; many do not, marrying local women and/or establishing migrant communities in cities such as Medan and Jakarta.⁹

The Minangkabau possess a range of rich traditions of decorative art, storytelling, music, and dance, though there is little evidence of full-blown theatre existing in West Sumatra before the late nineteenth century. This was a period of rapid social and cultural change in West Sumatra as in other parts of the Indies. Urban swirls¹⁰ generated new forms of cultural expression as formerly distinct expressive traditions came into contact with each other, jostling for attention.

Cultural jostling is evident from reports in newspapers from the turn of the twentieth

century. The first reported appearance of Abdul Muluk theatre in West Sumatra was in 1892, when a troupe from Solok was awaited with some anticipation.¹¹ Mahieu's Komedi Stamboel troupe played Padang in 1897, attracting substantial numbers of both Asian and European spectators, though the mix of Malay and Dutch dialogue in plays such as *Faust* was not always comprehensible to the latter.¹² A Chinese ritual celebration in Padang in 1902 featured both Chinese opera (Wayang Makau) and Malay opera (Komedi Melayu). Spectators arrived in droves.¹³

Origins in Late-Colonial West Sumatra

The Padang-born writer-director Andjar Asmara provides in his memoirs an intimate portrait of the theatrical life of Padang in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁴ He describes memorable visits by some of the most celebrated Malay popular theatre troupes, including Wayang Kassim¹⁵ and Juliana Opera under the direction of Marie Hoogeveen.¹⁶ Andjar Asmara was initially fascinated by circus, and made his own with other children in his neighbourhood. The arrival of the Juliana Opera resulted in a new fascination with theatre. Andjar Asmara was introduced to Bangsawan acting styles and music by a semi-professional actor-musician who performed with the Juliana Opera, and was permitted to watch the Juliana Opera shows from the wings.

Andjar Asmara attributes major changes in West Sumatran theatrical practice to the influence of the Padangsche Opera company under the direction of Amiruddin. Around 1925 or 1926, this company began to perform theatrical adaptations of contemporary Indonesian novels by Minang authors. This corresponds to a period of great literary activity by Minang authors based both in West Sumatra and Java. Marah Roesli's novel *Sitti Nurbaya*, one of the novels adapted by the Padangsche Opera, 'was by far the most popular [Indonesian] novel before the war, and up to the present is still widely read in Indonesia'.¹⁷

Padangsche Opera's style of performance was very different from that of Bangsawan –

dialogue was spoken and not sung, and the language was not Malay but Minang. It was this company, according to Andjar Asmara, that facilitated a transition from the music theatre of Bangsawan to the spoken theatre referred to as Tonil (from the Dutch word meaning 'theatre') in Sumatra as a whole (playing a similar role to Dardanella and Miss Riboet's O.R.I.O.N.).

'Night Fairs' as Motors of Innovation

The 1920s was evidently a decade of rapid change in West Sumatran theatre, both in West Sumatra, and in the Minangkabau ethnoscape of West Sumatra and the major cities of Java and Sumatra with substantial Minang migrant communities. A characteristic theatrical event was a charity benefit variety show held in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) on 4 July 1926, with speeches concerning the cultural and economic resources of Sumatra, traditional and modern music, a sketch about the ancient Greek Olympics and its parallels with contemporary Sumatran sport culture, and a new play about an ailing mother and her children. The event was standing room only, drawing well over one thousand spectators.¹⁸

The origin of Randai is related to these newly arrived forms of cultural expression, but also to traditional expressive practices. It is generally believed that the term Randai originally referred to an indigenous dance form. An entry in an 1891 dictionary for 'randai' – defined as synonymous with *dampeng*, a dance form with singing and hand clapping – suggests that during the nineteenth century 'randai' was not a dramatic form with dialogue.¹⁹ The dance known as 'Randai Ilau', formerly a ritual dance associated with mortuary rites, is still extant in the Saningbakar region of West Sumatra. It is likely that this form in particular provided the name for the theatre.²⁰

The theatre form known as Randai, however, is thought to originate with a 1932 night fair (*pasar malam*) known as 'Fancy Fair' held in the area of Payakumbuh. Night fairs, a hybrid colonial form for the promotion of industry and consumer goods, entertainment,

sport, gaming, ceremony, and celebration, were first held in the cities and towns of the Indies with sizable European populations in the nineteenth century, but by the 1920s and 1930s also reached into the relatively rural areas in the western part of the archipelago, organized by Europeans, Chinese, and Indonesians.

Night fairs are noteworthy culturally as motors of innovation – contact zones where very different peoples, goods, and cultural forms were (and are) juxtaposed. Motivations for attending night fairs were even more varied than their associated clientele. Indonesian spectators went to night fairs for fun and fancy, marvelling at the latest technologies on display; observing cultural performances, fireworks, and open-air cinema shows; snacking and eating meals from a variety of Asian and European menus; going on carnival rides, competing in games, sports and other contests; gawking at Europeans, Arabs, and Chinese fellow-spectators; and occasionally purchasing souvenirs (such as hand crafts or textiles). Some of the attractions were walled off, involving additional expenditure, but generally the entry ticket (sometimes scaled according to race and age) paid for the full evening's entertainment. Variety was key: the more distinct types of expression articulated, the more *ramai* (festive, boisterous, busy) a night fair was understood to be.

The concomitant juxtaposition of cultures in the competitive night-fair field, where different attractions and vendors vied for public interest and attention, resulted in mergers as well as differentiation of cultural markers. Novelty was a significant factor in achieving distinction. There was characteristically little concern for authenticity of expression, and much concern for spectacle and impact. This cultural arena has been influential in the generic development and aesthetics of a number of twentieth-century Indonesian performing art forms in addition to Randai, including Dangdut, Kethoprak, Sri Mulat, and even Wayang Kulit.²¹

One of the favourite attractions for Indonesians attending night fairs in the 1920s and 1930s was Malay popular theatre, known

variously as Bangsawan, Komedi Stambul, and Tonil. This sort of theatre, featuring drop-and-wing scenery, singing and dancing, and a dramaturgy deriving loosely from the conventions of nineteenth-century European operetta and melodrama, had begun to be prevalent in western Sumatra in the 1880s. Its earliest local proponent in West Sumatra was a certain Si Nong, the son of Raja Burhan Udin of Batavia, who is credited with introducing popular theatre from Riau to Padang.²²

By the 1930s there were frequent tours by large popular theatres groups from Java and Malaya; there were also innumerable smaller local groups performing a mixed repertoire of stories from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, European fairytales, true-crime tales, European adventure stories, and Javanese and Malay legends. Popular songs and dances (European and Asian), variety acts, acrobatics, comic sketches, and even boxing matches were presented between the acts of plays. Of particular interest were the actresses, both idolized as glamorous and sophisticated and demonized as prostitutes and corrupters of morality in the public sphere.²³

Malay popular theatre at night fairs attracted multi-ethnic audiences, but was also sometimes an occasion for ethnic strife. A correspondent writing under the name of 'Toeankoe Soedoet' records the following incident in 1925 at a popular theatre (Opera) show at a night fair in Padang. A Dutch couple were watching the show from the stalls when two Natives (Inlanders) arrived and sat in front of them, obstructing their view. The Dutchman brusquely registered his displeasure, but the Natives refused to move, leading to an argument. 'Toeankoe Soedoet' draws a moral message from the incident, suggesting that the Dutch man was expressing an attitude of superiority to Natives by rudely demanding that the Natives move, while the protesting Natives were demonstrating an egalitarian spirit in refusing to move – they felt they had a perfect right to sit there, and that someone who was genuinely polite would not ask for them to move in the first place. A potential danger, the author concludes, is that this

attitude of superiority might be transferred to and internalized by Natives in their treatment of others.²⁴

A Favoured 'Origin' Story

The Malay popular theatre group performing at the 1932 Fancy Fair held in Labiah Basilang in Payakumbuh, under the direction of a certain Jalut, appears to have been a small-scale local group. At the same event, there was also traditional *sijobang* story-telling performed by local storytellers of note, with simple musical accompaniment. These storytellers performed *Intan Korong*, a Minang 'epic' (*kaba*), serially over the course of eleven nights under the sponsorship of the Horizon football club. Inspired by the nearby presence of *sijobang*, Jalut's theatrical group experimented with performing a classical Minang story of the same sort. This initial experiment was deemed a failure, the actors being judged inadequate in their portrayal of traditional Minang characters.

The experiment generated interest, however, and subsequently a certain B. Nagari Basa teamed up with a Payakumbuh prison guard *cum* martial arts (*silek*) guru named Pono Mudo to produce a hybrid of *sijobang*, popular theatre, and martial arts, which they called 'Randai.' This group was more successful, and soon a number of groups of the same sort sprang into existence, bringing refinements to the genre, including the use of Minang rather than Malay for dialogue. Jalut's group almost certainly had women portraying females on stage, but subsequent groups were all-male, using female impersonators to portray female characters.²⁵

The veracity of the above 'origin story', recounted by Damhuri in a paper presented at a symposium on Randai in 1975, is difficult to ascertain. It has been widely cited in the scholarly literature,²⁶ though there is conflicting evidence – Kartomi, for one, has written that the first Randai performance took place in 1926 in another part of West Sumatra.²⁷ But Damhuri's account seems a not-unlikely tale, based on what we know of the hybrid cultural conditions of the time and place.

For example, at a night fair very much like the Payakumbuh event, held in Padang in 1932 for the benefit of a local school, entertainments included a magic show and traditional singing (*menyanyikan lagu lama*), featuring *syair* (epic poetry) from Sumatra and elsewhere in Indonesia with archaic melodies (*lagu yang terpendam*). There was also Malay-language theatre on six of the fair's nine nights, with stories such as 'Malin Kundang' (a traditional tale), 'Step-Mother' and 'Disaster Caused by Lust'.²⁸ The 1932 'Fancy Fair' at Payakumbuh described by Damhuri was one of a type, not a one-off event, and of the sort conducive to artistic borrowing. It is not inconceivable that Jalut's group was only one of a number of groups experimenting with combining Malay popular theatre and the Minang tradition.

I would like to suggest that this interest in 'complicating' Randai is a modernist impulse, even apparent in the 'Olympic' sketch at the 1926 charity benefit noted above. In this sketch, Apollo (played by Mohammad Syafei) praised the ancient Greeks for their use of sport in bringing unity and peace through the medium of sport. He continued:

We, the people of the Indies . . . also possess sports [*English in original*] such as pencak [*martial arts*], handkerchief dancing, plate dancing, Randai, Dampeng, and others. We have to advance our sports, throwing away what is rotten, supplementing what is deficient, so that these ¹⁰ or 15 types can become 100 or up to 200 types.²⁹

First Reports of Randai

The modified, theatrical form of Randai emerged as a reflex of just these sorts of supplementation and sorting processes in the service of parity with other cultures and societies, near and far. The possession of a vernacular theatre, equivalent but not identical to the pan-Malay *Bangsawan*, marked ethnic groups in western Indonesia as distinct and culturally advanced: hence the near-simultaneous appearance of Randai alongside Opera Batak (Sumatra), Tonil (West Java), Kethoprak (Central Java), Kemidi Rudat (Lombok), and a host of related popular theatres.

The first reports on and photographs of Randai began to surface in the national media in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In contrast to the early 1930s, these reports unanimously characterized Randai as a youth theatre performed by boys. Photographs show the actors and musicians as boys dressed in traditional Minang costume, performing martial arts in circular and semi-circular formation. The primary musical accompaniment, as remains the case today, is provided by *talempong*, bronze kettle drums struck with beaters. One set of photographs clearly depicts the action as taking place on a stage with a painted backdrop. This, and the use of props such as an umbrella of state (*payung ubur-ubur*) and a spear (*tongkat berambu*), is atypical of 'traditional' Randai performance, and might have been introduced only for the purpose of the photo session.³⁰

A subsequent article appearing in the same magazine depicts a Randai closer to the type practised today. Karim Halim, the author of the article, admits that the title 'Sandiwara Randai' (Randai Theatre) is a bit of a misnomer, for unlike the modern Sandiwara of urban Indonesia (a designation for popular theatre that replaced Tonil due to official linguistic policy during the Japanese occupation), no stage or scenery, nor even chairs for spectators, are used in Randai. Randai is an art form that 'lives in villages, where people still enjoy rural calm and the peace of the rice fields, who prefer in their hearts the songs of shepherds over *keroncong* [popular Indonesian music] or the temptations of jazz and foxtrot'.³¹

With Damhuri, Karim Halim suggests that the name 'Randai' was initially associated with a circular dance form grounded in the martial arts, known as *tari Randai* or 'Randai dance'. Performances of Randai theatre, also sometimes referred to as *si Marantang*, inevitably take place outside: the 'preferred location' remains the *sasaran*, the open space in front of long houses.³² (These are increasingly purely ceremonial, marking clan status, however.) Audiences gather around performers in a roughly circular formation. Musical accompaniment is provided by a singer, drum (*gendang*), flute (*saluang*), and spiked fiddle (*rebab*).



A West Sumatran Randai youth group in posed photos published in *Pandji Poestaka*, XX, No. 17 (1942), p. 67. Note (above) the *galombang* circular formation, opened up for the camera; and (below) the painted backdrop showing an idyllic tropical landscape – though this and other props might have been studio touches.



The stories, traditional to the Minangkabau, are enacted episodically, with long dialogic exchanges filled with worthy advice, social criticism, and humour, alternating with song and dance – particularly the circular dance known as *galombang*.³³ Occasions for performance include weddings or the installation of a *penghulu* (traditional authority figure); sometimes performances are also carried out for charity functions.

Instruction, Authority – and Opposition

Karim Halim stresses that Randai is meant primarily not for entertainment but for moral enlightenment:

The stories provide advice. More than that: they are allegories and satires directed at those who violate *adat* or do not pay sufficient to *adat* and to the youth who are overly western [*kagila-gilaan Barat*]. Newly created stories provide frequent allusion to those among the youth who have been too influenced by western tastes. This includes the young men and women who are crazy for the latest dance styles, who freely socialize [with members of the opposite sex], who do not respect Eastern values any more.³⁴

Such moral advice is said to be cleverly inserted into the dialogue even of ‘traditional’ stories, and is enlivened with jokes and comic antics.

The music of Randai had gained so much in popularity that it was on the lips of everyone, young and old:

Mothers put their children to sleep by singing *si Marantang*, young men whistle *si Marantang* as they sit idly in food stalls, girls prepare food in the kitchen humming *si Marantang* – it is as if the Minang world is filled with this song of Randai.³⁵

Such a story is consonant with the account of Damhuri’s introduction to Randai: Damhuri first heard the word ‘Randai’ in 1938 when he heard an itinerant cake-seller in Medan singing an unfamiliar song and was told that it was a ‘Randai song’ (*lagu Randai*) the street hawker had learned in Payakumbuh.³⁶

Karim Halim is clear that Randai was *not* popular with everyone in Minang society. He concludes his article with a discussion of its condemnation by religious authorities, who

claim that performances of this sort were forbidden by religion and that they served to distract children from studying how to chant the Qur’an. However, this tension is being alleviated as Randai is now increasingly finding ways to accommodate religion in performance. (What precisely is involved in this accommodation is not specified.)

The prominence of Randai in late-colonial Minang society was buttressed by the patronage it enjoyed from the traditional elite, including local leaders known as *penghulu*. These *penghulu* used Randai as an instrument to demonstrate their authority, playing a status game that also marked the life of the indigenous colonial elite in Java.³⁷

Randai was a theatre that appealed at many levels. Its dramatic form derived from popular theatre and openness to incorporating references to modern life linked it culturally with pan-Malay popular culture. Its attention to traditional stories, expressive forms of movement and music, and *adat* at the same time served to define and articulate a distinctly Minang identity – which in the late-colonial period was increasingly occupying the attention of modern intellectuals and traditional authority figures alike.³⁸

Randai’s grounding in *silek* martial arts and the associated kinesic skill and bodily discipline instilled in boys in the traditional *surau* setting meant that, though a ‘new’ art form, it was already visually sophisticated.

The dance prelude to the actual encounter [in a *silek* combat] is an elaborate system of posturing with a pause after each effective stance or of a brief sequence of highly controlled movements. Every attitude into which the dancer momentarily freezes is precise and intricately balanced.³⁹

Finally, its outdoor setting, non-hierarchical seating arrangements, its catchy tunes and its humour, made it accessible to the general public, targeting audiences whose members might never set foot inside a ‘proper’ theatre.

Randai after Independence

During the late 1950s and early 1960s Randai was recognized by LEKRA, the cultural arm of the Indonesian Communist Party, and

'Saedar Jandela': Randai in Performance

This performance by the Saedar Jandela troupe from Sungai Talang took place at the Sungai Barinigin Cultural Centre on 16–17 November 1996. The performance, which ran from 9.00 p.m. until 1.15 a.m., was the second part of a three-part cycle. The presentation coincided with the installation of a traditional *adat* chief. The précis which follows is based on van Zanten and Barengret (2000), and is reproduced by the kind permission of the authors.

A member of the troupe asks forgiveness for mistakes that may be made in performance and announces the name of the group and the story to be performed – Saedar Jandela.

Pamimbiang Dunie leaves his hometown, Payakumbuh, to acquire knowledge, experience, and wealth. In Riau, Pamimbiang meets Saedar Jandela, and they marry. But homesickness plagues the young man and he desires to return to his family.

SAEDAR

My beloved husband, my own rib,
Your homesickness is flaring up.
Our mutual love newly initiated,
And you, my husband, are already planning
a far journey.
I do not wish to be left behind.

What people say is true,
In the parlance of sailors:
'A ship sinks and we all drown together.'
My husband, you are homesick.

But it is necessary
To request the permission
Of my father, if I am to go with you.

Saedar and Pamimbiang go to see Saedar's father, Sutan Amiruda, and request his permission to go to Payakumbuh. Sutan Amiruda gives his consent.

SUTAN AMIRUDA

I grant my permission wholeheartedly.
And what, you may ask, is my reason
for this?

As far away as you might travel,
You recall yet your home.
You are homesick,

You long for your place of origin.
Surely, this is normal. . . .

Sutan Amiruda turns to address Saedar

SUTAN AMIRUDA

In a crowded public place, Saedar,
With the eyes of many upon you,
Do not cast your glance about shamelessly.
Why do I say this?

When you encounter young people, child,
Be honest and forthright.
Speak and behave appropriately,
Be courteous and polite.
Do not seek out men's eyes.

Sutan Amiruda then gives Saedar money for the journey, but this is observed by a brigand.

The next scene, which follows upon a galombang dance, is set in the forest. The brigand meets with his fellow thieves and they plot to rob Saedar and Pamimbiang. Pamimbiang and Saedar are set upon by the brigands on their way to Payakumbuh. After some verbal sparring, Pamimbiang fights with the malefactors, an opportunity for a display of spectacular martial arts and knife-fighting. Pamimbiang is defeated, though, and chased away. Saedar is robbed and abandoned. A popular song is sung during an interval.

In the next scene, Saedar is found by the hunting party of a local ruler named Sutan Limba Tuah. Against her wishes, Saedar is taken to the ruler's house. The ruler falls in love with Saedar and decides to marry her. Saedar objects but she has no say in the matter. But her protestations give Sutan Limba Tuah pause.

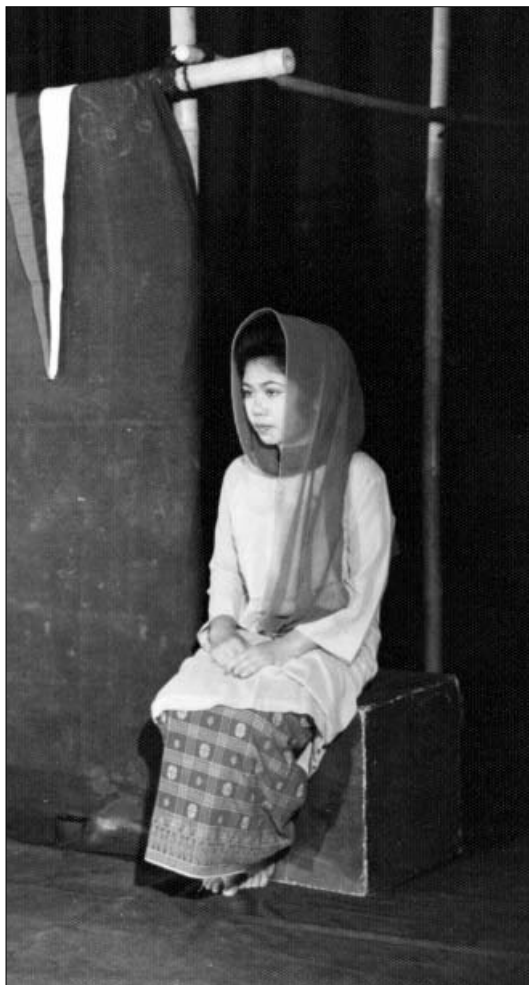
SUTAN LIMBA TUAH

I found a precious stone,
But maybe it will turn out to only be
an ordinary pebble.

The final scene is set a month after the disastrous robbery. Pamimbiang has been wandering in the forest during this time, in search of his beloved Saedar. He hears festive Talempong music. An old farmer informs Pamimbiang that the music is to announce a wedding. To his dismay, Pamimbiang learns that in a short time Sutan Limba Tuah will marry Saedar. The performance ends with a song and the audience disperses.

affiliated communist and socialist cultural and political organizations, as a 'genuine art form of the people. . . . In addition to por-

traying mutual co-operation, Randai also deals with stories concerning the whole life of the people, in the large part farmers who



work the land.' The art was viewed as open to being 'modernized' by those politically inclined, justifying their efforts with a traditional Minang proverb meaning 'Repair the decrepit, replace the decayed.'⁴⁰

Other troupes were directly affiliated with political organizations, including Masyumi (an Islamic political party) and the anti-Soekarno regionalist movement, Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia/Perjuangan Semesta (Total Struggle and the Republic of Indonesia's Revolutionary Government). Typically, rather than inventing new stories on explicitly political themes, old stories were used with improvisatory dialogue containing political messages.⁴¹ Randai's association with didacticism and its popular appeal made it ideal for reaching rural audiences who did not have access to modern media.

The destruction of the Communist Party and the inauguration of the self-proclaimed 'New Order' regime under Soeharto in 1965–1966 required major adjustments in the cultural field; and the Department of Information and the Department of Education and Culture played major roles in the regulation and sponsorship of Randai throughout the authoritarian New Order period (1966–98).

While female singers might have been introduced to Randai several years earlier, it is noteworthy that the first female players began performing around 1966.⁴² It was also at this time, immediately following the rise of the New Order, that women began to perform in the formerly all-male Ludruk theatre of East Java. Ludruk had even stronger links with radical politics than Randai, and was especially suspected of subversive tendencies due to the homosexuality prevalent among numerous troupes.

The creation of mixed troupes went along with attempts to normalize the form, bringing it in line with the aesthetically modernist project of 'development' engineered by the New Order, governed by a drive for the appearance of order,⁴³ where men are men and women are women, etc. The introduction of women to Ludruk was not received well, and the few troupes operating today tend to be all-male (with the usual exception of the off-stage female songstress, or *pesindhen*). In the case of Randai, the introduction of women stuck; less than one per cent of all Randai groups today are all-male.⁴⁴ Some gender role differentiation remains: women act and sing, but very rarely dance.⁴⁵

The introduction of women to Randai was not all due to governmental efforts. Pauka suggests that it was also due to an increased number of technically proficient female performers educated at arts academies, the condemnation of cross-dressing by religious leaders, and audience interest in more realistic acting (informed largely by the introduction of television).⁴⁶

The most important factor in the introduction of women to Randai, however, was probably the effective end of the old residence pattern by which adolescent boys lived communally with age-mates in *surau* before



Randai at the Pekan Teater Rakyat (Folk Theatre Festival), Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, 1982. Above: an all-male *galombang* dance. Below: an underling makes a traditional gesture of obeisance. Opposite page: costume, makeup and age preclude easy identification of the heroine's sex. Photos by Priyo S. Winardi, courtesy of Badan Pengembangan Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, Direktorat Kesenian (Department of Culture and Tourism, Directorate for the Arts).



departing on the *rantau*. The intimate link between Randai and communal living in the *surau* began to atrophy as early as the 1940s, but it greatly accelerated in subsequent decades.⁴⁷ The rise of secondary education and the establishment of single-family houses as preferable to the traditional long houses meant that boys continued to live with their nuclear families throughout adolescence.

Training in *silek* continued, of course, but this training was no longer linked to residence, and consequently 'local silek schools began to accept female practitioners, permitting them to learn the movement skills necessary to perform.'⁴⁸ Randai clubs were no longer strictly communal in basis, but were formed through 'schools, colleges, youth organizations, and voluntary bodies',⁴⁹ often cutting across class and residential lines.

Innovation – and Attenuation

Some observers have viewed government intervention in Randai as instrumental to its 'revitalization', pointing particularly to the importance of the regular government-sponsored festivals which began in 1974.⁵⁰ Festivals and symposia at the local and national level did much to codify Randai and establish norms for adjudication and comparison under the New Order.⁵¹ Numerous normalizing documents were produced describing how Randai 'ought' to be.⁵²

An important element of this standardization process has clearly been the government arts academy, Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia, in Padangpanjang, where both men and women have been studying Randai since the early 1970s.⁵³ The academy and the festivals have been particularly important in standardizing the use of written scripts; before the 1970s, Randai was based on oral storytelling and, as such, was much less subject to censorship and outside control.⁵⁴

The academy has also been an instrumental conduit for choreographic innovations. The ground-breaking work of Huriah Adam provides a major example. Huriah Adam integrated the experimental approach of the intercultural dance workshop at the Jakarta Arts Centre, Taman Ismail Marzuki (estab-

lished by Javanese choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo in 1968 following his return from New York), with Minangkabau traditions of martial arts and storytelling, including Randai. Huriah Adam's 'new' dance techniques and innovative dance-dramas, created before her death in a 1971 airplane accident, were taught to dance students at secondary and tertiary dance schools in Padang, as well as in the Jakarta Arts Institute.⁵⁵ Innovations which reached West Sumatra via the arts academies have subsequently informed dance in Randai.

Chairul Harun, a journalist interested in Randai since 1969, authored a Randai play in 1977 entitled *Baringin Gadang Sutan Palito Alam di Tengah Kota*, which was enforced by the government as a compulsory repertory piece for many groups. This tale of a Communist *bupati* (regional head) vilified the party as being associated with racketeering, and encouraged migrant Minangs to return to their homeland. The choice of the word *baringin* (banyan tree) in the story's title associated the play with Golkar, the ruling party, which uses the banyan tree as its symbol.⁵⁶

Numerous modifications in Randai aesthetics came in under the New Order, which collectively served to make the form more 'presentable' to VIP audiences unaccustomed and unwilling to outdoor arena theatre.⁵⁷

Over the past twenty-five years new elements – such as newly-written stories, more 'realistic' acting styles, modern song melodies, dance styles, and costumes – have been incorporated into Randai. Modern staging techniques often impact the performance through raised, proscenium-style stages, brighter lighting, and sound amplification. Almost all groups today rely on microphones.⁵⁸

Just as (or more) significantly, Randai's social function has attenuated as it has become 'aestheticized'. Craig Latrell has persuasively argued that Randai traditionally served in large part as a way of preparing young men to go on the *rantau*. The stories enacted almost invariably featured in a central role a young man on the *rantau* who encountered martial challenges from unscrupulous brigands, but also advice from wise elders.

For the younger members of a group, *randai* served in effect as a rehearsal for *merantau* [going



Acting space is defined as much by the actors as by dramatic lighting and the theatre architecture of a thrust stage in Wisran Hadi's *Puti Bungsu* (*Youngest Princess*) performed at the Pekan Seni Antar Dewan Kesenian (Inter-Regional Arts Council Festival) at Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, 1976. Photo by Priyo S. Winardi, courtesy of Badan Pengembangan Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata.

on the *rantau*]: young men acted out their upcoming *merantau* in the presence of older villagers, receiving approbation and advice from their elders in the group in the guise of characters.⁵⁹

The decline of *rantau* in Minang life and the associated decline of the matrilineal system and body of *adat* have resulted in Randai becoming less a medium for 'passing on wisdom, skills, and customs' and more a token of 'tradition'.⁶⁰ Its aestheticization opened the way to its appropriation by intellectuals and artists not trained in the tradition. Randai festivals held regularly in Padang, for example, were deemed useful not only

to develop Randai as a contemporary theatre, but also to enrich experimental theatre artists and develop their appreciation of local cultural roots or theatrical idioms featured in the form of Randai.⁶¹

The Appropriation of Randai

In the wake of these festivals, urban experimental theatre groups such as Teater Jenjang of Padang developed, combining features of Randai and western-oriented theatre.⁶² The

transport of Randai to Jakarta on occasions such as the national theatre festival in 1978⁶³ allowed the theatre form to be consumed by the capital's artistic avant-garde, who expropriated Randai, mining its idiomatic characteristics for their theatrical productions.

The appropriation of Randai, its dramaturgical form, and its characteristic stylistic features by contemporary Indonesian artists has generated polemics. Rendra, Indonesia's most famous writer-director, has critiqued a 1982 Jakarta performance of Chairul Harun's *Malin Kundang*, based on a legend of the Minangkabau (also enacted as a Randai play) in which a man makes his fortune abroad but neglects his mother on his return, resulting in him being turned into stone. Rendra writes that 'the blocking of this drama is taken from Randai but without sufficient creativity manifested in the appropriative process. The result was that [the movement] was only imitative.'⁶⁴

The plays of Wisran Hadi, the playwright-director of the Padang group Teater Bumi (Earth Theatre), are condemned and praised in equal measure.⁶⁵ Wisran also turns to Minang legends and Randai structure and

form for his inspiration; but his aim is to satirize, subvert, and critique rather than to celebrate the traditions and *adat* of the Minangkabau. This has resulted in Wisran being socially ostracized from traditionalist circles in West Sumatra (and consequently from one important source of local patronage), but has also brought him national and international acclaim: Teater Bumi represented Indonesia in the 1990 Festival of Indonesia in the USA, and Wisran won the prestigious Southeast Asia Writer's Award in 2000. Typical of Wisran's plays is a layered structure, in which the archaic world of legend is evoked through dance and sung poetry while the contemporary world of youth culture and state bureaucracy is voiced in dialogue.

Randai has also begun to appear on international stages played by actors and musicians with only indirect ties with the Minang tradition. Kirstin Pauka, a Randai researcher at the University of Hawaii, invited a group of Randai artists to Honolulu who then trained students to perform Randai in English, following an established pattern of training in Asian performance at this university.⁶⁶

The Work of Indija

Even more intriguing perhaps is the ongoing neo-Randai work of Indija Noesbar Mahjoeddin, an Australian of Minang descent, born in Adelaide in 1963, who studied contemporary dance and lighting design at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in Perth. She then spent a year in Indonesia studying Randai at the government Arts Academy in Padang, before returning to Australia in 1993 to form the troupe called MusiK KabaU, specializing in Randai and Minang-influenced performance. Indija views her work as playwright-director-choreographer as being 'as close as you would want to get to a literal interpretation of Randai in another culture'.⁶⁷

Indija's major works, *The Horned Matriarch: the Story of Reno Nilam* (1998) and *The Butterfly Seer* (2000), are both formally derivative of 'traditional' Randai, alternating *galombang* circular dancing, dialogue, and song – though with perhaps less emphasis on displays of

silek. Her narrative sources are not always traditional, however. *The Butterfly Seer* was based on the 'Ayesha' episode of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, in which a young carver receives a divine inspiration and leads an Islamic community on an overland trek to the sea, promising that they will thence be magically transported to Mecca. Indija's dramatic adaptation is faithful to the broad outlines of Rushdie's fable, though with Minang language, cultural referents, and allusions inserted.⁶⁸

Many of Indija's actors and musicians are Minang, and she has produced her work under the umbrella of Sydney's Minangkabau Community, but she has also cast Filipinas and Australians of European descent in key roles. Indija states that she has 'been cultivating Randai as an alternative theatre experience whose structure embodies and reinforces a particularly Minangkabau cultural outlook and subverts many of the traditional western theatre conventions'.⁶⁹

Indija's work has flourished in Australia's multicultural and community art worlds. It is performed at festivals and receives support from a variety of public funding bodies, including the Australia Council Performing Arts Board, the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council, and Arts Queensland. An award from Asialink Performing Arts Residency allowed Indija to spend much of 1997 furthering her studies of Randai, and to create a Minang rendering of the story of Salome in collaboration with a Minang composer.

Yet her work raises all kinds of questions about cultural authenticity. Indija's stated goal is transparent cultural translation, but a Minang viewer reportedly experienced an early work as no more than 'Randai coloured theatre . . . western theatre in a Randai style'.⁷⁰ Indija has described herself as being situated in the 'antipodean *rantau*', and actively identifies with Australia's Minang community, but *rantau* is normatively understood as circular migration, with a period of absence from the homeland of the Minangkabau lasting a few years at most. Indija's Minang father is a permanent resident of Australia; Indija herself has only come to



A contemporary version of a *galombang* circle dance in Wisran Hadi's *Puti Bungsu*. Photo by Priyo S. Winardi, courtesy of Badan Pengembangan Kebudayaan dan Parawisata, Direktorat Kesenian (Department of Culture and Tourism, Directorate for the Arts).

know Minang culture through him and intensive periods of study in West Sumatra.

Traditional Minang (male) culture is predicated on the practice of *rantau*, and, as Latrell argues, Randai is all *about* this predication. But what happens when *rantau* no longer means (at least at the individual level) temporary displacement, when cultural actors have to imagine themselves on a permanent *rantau* and create Randai based on this act of imagination? Like Ayesha, the butterfly seer of *The Satanic Verses*, Indija promises magical transportation to a distant land. It is not so much that Indija's neo-Randai theatre is 'about' *rantau*, but that in and through her work Randai itself has gone on a *rantau* – but it is not clear when and if it is to return permanently to its West Sumatran 'home'. Much is asked – whether anything is given is in doubt.

Reflections

The emergence and development of Randai as a 'local', 'traditional' art form in the twen-

tieth century might be understood as a mediation of cultural and social change under the influence of translocal popular culture, Islam, nationalism, and economic opportunity outside West Sumatra. It is a tension between a centrifugal pull and a centripetal force to establish and maintain a moral centre and sense of local identity that has created a need and meaning for Randai.

'Traditional' and 'folk' theatre in much of Indonesia has been in decline for decades, but that is not universally the case,⁷¹ and the large number of Randai troupes still in West Sumatra – 250 were estimated to be active in 1994⁷² – is an indication of the form's continued popularity and social significance. Purists complain about the form's decline into rough comedy, its over-emphasis on television- and movie-inspired violence, and the end of traditional systems of *surau*-based training. Yet the ability of Randai performers and groups to adapt to changing circumstances – playing in Minang community centres and on night-fair stages with strobe lights in Medan,⁷³ at national theatre festivals

in Jakarta and teaching college students in Hawaii and Padang – suggests that there is a long life ahead for the theatre.

The reasons for Randai's resilience are undoubtedly complex, but one factor certainly has to do with the structural organization of the troupes. Randai troupes tend to be only semi-professional; while the salaries earned by troupe members might equal or surpass earnings in their 'day jobs', there is an ethic of dedicated amateurism in most troupes. Usually, only one story is performed by any given troupe, after which that troupe is named; once local audiences grow bored with its rendition of this story, it disbands. The relatively short life of the troupes means that structural continuity is not grounded in organizations so much as Minang society itself. This provides a ready mechanism for the societal mediation of aesthetic change. That which is decrepit is to be repaired, that which is decayed is to be replaced.

Notes and References

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